

Topic: Ren - Benevolence, Love

Name: Maria Mahin

Title: "Love Dumplings"

College: Hunter College

Date: October 5th 2014

“Love Dumplings”

If I were given a second chance to relive one moment of my childhood, I would without a doubt go back to the Sunday afternoons which my Aunt and I would spend folding dumplings. Things have changed a lot since then. Ten years ago I was impatient and ungrateful. Ten years ago I was still shaping my own ideas, and discovering who I wanted to be. Ten years ago my aunt was still alive; yet I ignorantly hated these afternoons I spent with her. Folding dumplings was a tedious task, and the skins often broke under my harsh squeezing. I was impatient and longed to be outside, playing on the streets or daydreaming under the trees. The weekly act of dumpling making was more of a chore than a reward. It wasn't until ten years later that I realized how much of an impact these afternoons would have on my life.

My aunt, like my mother and the rest of her family, had grown up in China during the Cultural Revolution. This was a period that left many people jobless and in poverty (Historylearningsite). She was robbed of her childhood, and was forced to help her family scrape by on the little money they could earn. By the time she was in her twenties, things had changed. Although her family's condition improved, her own health grew worse. She had slowly developed a severe form of scoliosis that left her noticeably hunched over, with a large hump on her back. Her dreams became distanced, because she couldn't find a job. After all, no one wanted to hire someone so hunched - so different. She tried to not let her condition crush her, but inside she couldn't hold back feelings of doubt. “I'm not beautiful, and no man will ever want me” she often told herself. She never did marry, and spent the remainder of her life living with my grandparents, two people who she knew still loved her.

As I grew older, my mother would more frequently take me to visit my aunt and grandparents. On those weekends, my aunt would take me to the park to play, and tell me stories of her life and

childhood. When I was younger, I enjoyed these excursions, for I liked spending time with my aunt and listening to her praise me. She would often hug me, and tell me “Ni yong yuran si wo da bao bei.” (In Chinese: “You will always be my love”). However as i grew older and more confident, I began to grow embarrassed by her. I was more mature (or so I thought), and I did not need an adult clinging to me. Some of the other kids at the park would make fun of my aunt’s back, and sometimes I even found myself joining in. In retrospect, I know this was a terrible thing to do, but at the time I couldn’t help it. I wanted more than anything to fit in. After hearing all of her stories, I didn’t want to have to suffer through the same exclusion she did.

By the time I was ten years old, my mother first assigned me the duty of helping my aunt make Sunday dinner, which always used to be dumplings. When I joined her for the first time in the kitchen, she was overjoyed. At first she placed her hands over mine, and guided them as I squeezed together and folded the sheets of dough. She never appeared to be angry, even after I ripped holes in the dough many times. She would laugh and say “Too much meat in that one! Unless you have the appetite of your grandfather!” I remember how she lit up the room with her joy. She was welcoming, light-hearted, and forgiving, traits which I will always remember her for. However at the time, that didn’t matter to me. I didn’t want to be in the kitchen. Sheet after sheet of dumpling wrappers would rip, and at times, I would make up an excuse to leave early just so I would not have to embarrass myself with this task. “I have to study for school” I would tell her. She would nod understandingly. The next week I would tell her that I had to clean up my room. She would smile, and tell me that I was welcome to join her next time. By the time of her death, I had went months without helping her prepare dinner. I would so often try to avoid her that she eventually stopped asking. Somehow I still had the nerve to eat those dumplings every week, sometimes even asking for a second bowl. My aunt never commented about my lack of presence

in the kitchen. She would just reply "I'm glad you like them!" but now with a hint of sadness in her voice.

My aunt passed away in the winter of 2006, due to rare heart and lung complications found in untreated and severe cases of scoliosis (Knowyourback). I didn't find out she passed away until a few days after her death, after my mother sat down on the dining room table and cried. To my embarrassment, she tried to console me. "You aunt loved you" she told me. "You were like her own daughter." Her words really impacted me, and I grew disgusted by myself; not for anything I ever did to my aunt, but rather for what I had failed to do. To make it even worse, my mother ended by saying "You have brought much joy to her life. Thank you for being such a great niece. I love you." I was riddled with guilt. "No I'm not", I silently told myself. "No I'm not."

Although eight years have passed since my aunt's death, I will never forget the unconditional love she offered me even when I did not return it back. I realized that making dumplings was more than just putting together dinner. It was piecing together a relationship, one in which only time and understanding could maintain. As author Jackson Brown Jr. has said "Love is when the other person's happiness is more important than your own" (Thinkexist). I realized that through my aunt's love for me, she had always put me first. Although I could no longer make up for my previous actions, from her death onwards I tried to spread this unconditional love she shared with me to everyone else I met. Steve Maraboli once stated "My past has not defined me, destroyed me, deterred me, or defeated me; it has only strengthened me" (Goodreads). Similarly, I made it my goal to become a person my aunt would still be proud of.

As expressed by Mahatma Gandhi, "Where there is love, there is life" (Brainyquote). I have discovered the truth of these words through the few afternoons I had accompanied my aunt in the

kitchen. Although my aunt had previously been subjected to much rejection, she still remained affectionate, and put her love into the special afternoons she spent with me. In her eyes, I was a child, symbolic of innocence and open-mindedness. I was not someone to judge her, so she felt she could open up her heart to me. She gained her vitality from my happiness, yet I didn't realize this. Not until it was too late. Now looking back, I realize all of those afternoons, she was doing much more than preparing food. In each fold and crease of dough, my aunt was making what I now call "love dumplings," treats seemingly bland on the outside, but brimming with the treasure of affection on the inside. How the dumplings themselves turned out was completely irrelevant. It was the process of making them - the time spent together that really brought joy into her life. Looking back on those afternoons, I learned not to take the people in your life for granted. You might eventually realize that seemingly insignificant moments serve as major influences on who you become. For me, afternoons with my aunt have shaped me to become a more loving, accepting person. I aim to treat everyone with the equal respect, because despite differences in background, personality, and aspirations, we are all human and deserve to be treated lovingly. I secretly hope that by showing people that someone cares for them, that kindness will be reciprocated again and again, until one small act of kindness impacts thousands of people. I believe lives can be changed by showing love for one another, whether it be through a conversation, spending time with someone, or even something as ordinary as making dumplings. In the end, small gestures of affection can take place anywhere, whether it be in your home, at school, or even in the kitchen.

Works Cited

"H. Jackson Brown, Jr. Quotes." *Thinkexist.com*. ThinkExist, n.d. Web.
<http://thinkexist.com/quotation/love_is_when_the_other_person-s_happiness_is_more/8931.html>.

- *This quote is by Jackson Brown.*

"Mahatma Gandhi Quote." *BrainyQuote*. Xplore, n.d. Web.
<<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/mahatmagan100717.html>>.

- *This quote is by Mahatma Gandhi.*

"Quotes About Past." (*1116 Quotes*). N.p., n.d. Web.
<<http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/past?page=2>>.

- *This quote is by Steve Maraboli from "Unapologetically You: Reflections on Life and the Human Experience"*

"Scoliosis." Scoliosis. N.p., n.d. Web. 05 Oct. 2014.
<<http://knowyourback.org/Pages/SpinalConditions/Scoliosis/default.aspx>>.

"The Cultural Revolution." *The Cultural Revolution*. N.p., n.d. Web
<http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/cultural_revolution.htm>.